

# Gender, Power and Representation of the Body in *The Water Margin*

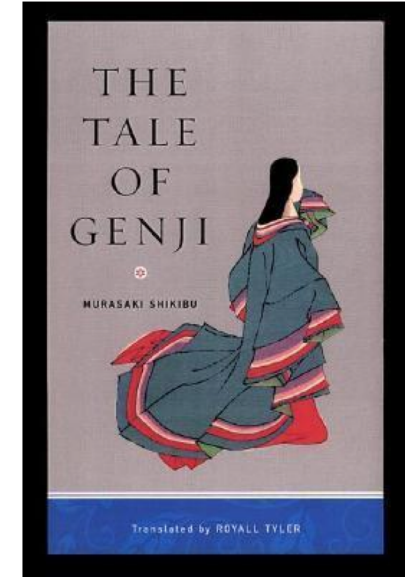
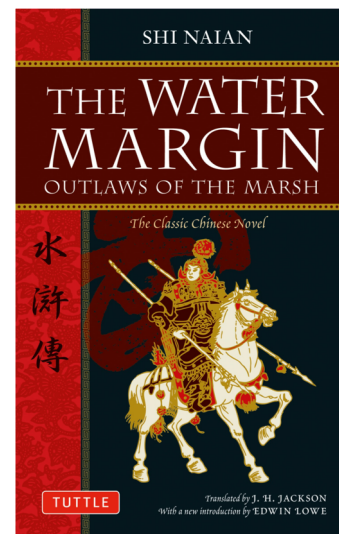
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Nicholas Grooms

CHIN 4090- Readings in Masterworks of Classical Chinese  
Fiction

# Outline

- Introduction
- Background of *The Water Margin*
  - Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder
  - Wife of He Jiusu
- Comparison with *The Tale of Genji*
  - Murasaki Shikibu
- *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*
  - Examples from Fox and Ghost stories
- Conclusion



# Introduction to Essay Aims

- How are the relationships between gender and societal obligations portrayed in Classical Chinese literature? (power struggles and negotiations)
- Illustrations of the human body as examples of gendered distinctions within East Asia
- Comparing Classical Chinese works with Classical Japanese literature, demonstrate shared tendencies of these selected works, and how cultural differences in gender relationships along with their literary representations can be better approached and appreciated with a more contextualized understanding of gender in traditional East Asian literature

# *The Water Margin*

- Consists of one hundred and twenty 回 (*hui*, chapters), situated in the North Song dynasty of the 11th century, attributed to Shi Nai'an
- The narrative is centered on a band of 108 renegades and outlaws who are portrayed as the heroes and heroines against a corrupt government
- Heroines challenge conventional Confucian views on women and their place within society ( Ex: Hu San Niang)
- Feminine heroines portrayed from a male perspective
  - Contrasting them to masculine traits and roles
  - Confining them within culturally established feminine qualities or characteristics

Upper right, image of Ichijosei Kosanjo 一丈青扈三娘 (Ten Feet of Green, Hu Sanniang). Lower right, Liu Xiao Xiao as Hu San Niang





# Pan Jinlian and Wu the Elder

- Pan Jinlian is the novel's ultimate example of treachery and unfaithfulness between a husband and wife (*femme fatale* tragedy)
- Martin Huang suggests that two main strategies were employed for constructing gender identities
  - Analogy through close association with the feminine
  - Differentiation defining masculinity sharply away from the feminine
- Huang also notes that, "in a sense, almost all attempts to come to terms with a man's anxiety over not having what he is supposed to have"(Huang, 8)



One of many modern dramas retelling the story of Pan Jinlian

# Pan Jinlian and the Wife of Hu Jinshu

- Jinlian is illustrated as expressing a desire for strength and freedom of choice;  
**“You are a man! Yet you are not master of your own affairs, but listen to other people’s orders”** (Shi, 287)
- He Jiushu, who investigated Wu the Elder’s death, by contrast depended on his wife’s sage advice to help save evidence of the murder
- However, there is no physical description of her appearance given
  - Quality as a woman is not confined to a notion of beauty or sexual desirability
  - Different notions of cleverness and intellect

# *The Tale of Genji*

- Written by Murasaki Shikibu sometime before 1007 or 1008 A.D. (Heian period of Japan)
- Considered the world's oldest novel
- In Heian Japan, Chinese cultural influence was already well established, yet Japan was also undergoing a time of cultural readjustment
- Japanese literature was beginning to craft its own identity apart from the Chinese tradition, especially by women writers like Murasaki Shikibu



Young Murasaki in the *Tale of Genji* (Genji Wakamurasaki), from the series Mirror of Renowned Exemplary Women of Japan (Yamato kômei retsujô kagami)

# *The Tale of Genji*

Richard Bowring notes, “In many ways she (Murasaki) reverses the dependency (of male-perspectives on women). Certainly the men have the outward authority, but a man like **Genji is defined in terms of his relationship with women**. They may be the object of his ‘seeing’ but we see him through the eyes of the women, and **she who controls the perspective controls the entire vision**” (Bowring, 17)



Illustrated scene from *The Tale of Genji*

# *The Tale of Genji*

- His Majesty's relationship with Kiritsubo no Kōi (Genji's mother) likened to story of Chinese Emperor Xuanzong and the legendary Yang Guifei (In Japanese Yōkihi)
- At the time of Kiritsubo's funeral and being posthumously titled Consort that, "Even this made many resent her further, but the wiser ones at last understood that her loveliness in looks and bearing, and her sweet gentleness of temper, had made her impossible actually to dislike. **It was His Majesty's unbecoming penchant for her,** ... that had made some treat her with cold disdain, and they remembered her fondly for the warmth and kindness of her disposition" (Murasaki, 6-7)

# Pu Songling's *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*

- Stories of fox-spirits and ghosts transform women in ways that may challenge gendered societal norms
- However, these same stories may actually reinforce Confucian notions through expressing suspicions of women and their influence on their male counterparts
- Endowing the female characters with special qualities and often supernatural forms create intriguing and memorable stories
- Example: Miss Lienxiang (a fox spirit), Miss Li (female ghost), and young scholar Sang Tzu-ming

# Conclusion

- Gender relationships within Classical Chinese and Japanese literature can be presented as negotiations-in-progress and display complex power dynamics
- Illustrations of the human body and the direction of perception show layers of character construction that guide the reader's attention to important themes
- Female characters can both challenge and reinforce societal expectations or gender relations depending on their literary depiction (cultural background) and the reader's perspective

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# Acknowledgments

Special thanks to:

Dr. Li Guo and my CHIN 4090 class

Atsuko sensei and Izumi sensei

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Asian Studies program

Utah State University